

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 IO-13 ISO-00 SSM-03 SAA-01 SES-02
CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05 H-01 INR-10 L-03 NSAE-00
NSC-05 PA-01 SP-02 SS-15 ICA-11 TRSE-00 OMB-01
/096 W

-----080763 041144Z /10

R 031645Z AUG 78
FM AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 4646
INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN
AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
AMEMBASSY BONN
AMEMBASSY CAIRO
AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS

AMEMBASSY JIDDA
AMEMBASSY KUWAIT
AMEMBASSY LONDON
AMEMBASSY PARIS
AMCONSUL JERUSALEM
USMISSION USUN NY
USMISSION SINAI

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E. O. 11652: NA
TAGS: PINT IS
SUBJ: ISSUE OF "WHO IS A JEW" RAISED IN KNESSET

1. THE EMOTION-CHARGED ISSUE OF "WHO IS A JEW" AROSE
AGAIN LAST WEEK IN THE KNESSET IN THE FORM OF A PRIVATE-
MEMBER'S BILL TO AMEND THE LAW OF RETURN. INTRODUCED BY
POALEI AGUDAT YISRAEL'S (PAY) SINGLE MK, KALMAN KAHANA,
THE BILL WOULD IN EFFECT RECOGNIZE ONLY THOSE CONVERSIONS
TO JUDAISM PERFORMED IN ACCORDANCE WITH "HALACHA" (ORTHO-
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DOX RELIGIOUS LAW) AND WOULD BAR APPLICATION OF THE LAW
OF RETURN TO THOSE CONVERTED BY CONSERVATIVE OR REFORM
RABBIS. SPRUNG ON A SPARSELY-ATTENDED HOUSE (ONLY EIGHT
ALIGNMENT AND TWO DMC MK'S WERE PRESENT), IT EASILY
PASSED ITS FIRST READING BY A DECISIVE MAJORITY ON
JULY 26 AND WAS REFERRED TO COMMITTEE. HOWEVER, PROSPECTS
FOR ITS ENACTMENT WHEN THE KNESSET RECONVENES LATE IN

OCTOBER (IT ADJOURNED AUGUST 2 FOR ITS SUMMER RECESS)
APPEAR DOUBTFUL.

2. LIMITING RECOGNITION IN ISRAELI JURISPRUDENCE TO THOSE
CONVERSIONS PERFORMED ACCORDING TO HALACHA (ORTHODOX PRACTICE)
HAS LONG BEEN AN AMBITION OF THE ORTHODOX
ESTABLISHMENT. WHILE THE LESS EXTREME NATIONAL RELIGIOUS
PARTY HAS IN RECENT YEARS BEEN CONTENT TO LEAVE THE ISSUE
IN ABEYANCE, THE QUESTION OF DEFINING "WHO IS A JEW" HAS
BEEN KEPT ALIVE FOR YEARS BY THE TWO ULTRA-ORTHODOX AGUDAH
PARTIES. ITS SURFACING
INVARIABLY GENERATES A STORM OF CONTROVERSY. THE AMENDMENT
IS HIGHLY UNPOPULAR WITH SECULARISTS HERE AND WITH OTHERS
WHO ARE SENSITIVE TO THE WRATH IT PROVOKES IN U.S. CON-
SERVATIVE AND REFORM JEWISH CIRCLES. (REPORTS OF RABBI ALEXANDER
SCHINDLER'S INDIGNANT REACTION APPEARED IN THE PRESS ON THE
MORROW OF THE VOTE.)

3. THE ISSUE IS AS DIVISIVE IN THE COALITION AS IT IS IN
THE GENERAL POPULATION. ALTHOUGH THE AMENDMENT WAS ONE OF
AGUDAT YISRAEL'S DEMANDS FOR JOINING THE LIKUD GOVERNMENT
LAST YEAR, BEGIN PROMISED IN THE COALITION AGREEMENT ONLY
TO "TRY" TO SECURE ENACTMENT. HAVING JUST SUCCESSFULLY
OVERCOME COALITION RELUCTANCE TO CHAMPION THE EASING OF
EXEMPTION PROCEDURES FOR GIRLS ON RELIGIOUS GROUND,
AGUDAT YISRAEL
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HAD NO INTENTION OF DISTURBING COALITION UNITY AGAIN SO
SOON BY RAISING THE "WHO IS A JEW" CONUNDRUM. SOURCES
CLOSE TO THE AGUDAH PARTIES TELL US THAT POALEI AGUDAT
YISRAEL (WHICH IS NOT PART OF THE COALITION) RAISED THE
ISSUE NOW TO EMBARRASS AGUDAT YISRAEL, A REFLECTION OF
THE BITTER RIVALRY THAT HAS DEVELOPED BETWEEN THE TWO PAR-
TIES SINCE THEY DISSOLVED THEIR TORAH FRONT LAST YEAR.
ALTHOUGH IT HURTTLED TO OBTAIN A KNESSET MAJORITY FOR THE
BILL'S FIRST READING, THE NRP IS ALSO AMBIVALENT ABOUT
THE TIMING.

4. DESPITE THEIR PRIVATE RESERVATIONS, IN THE GLARE OF
OPEN KNESSET DEBATE THE TWO LARGER RELIGIOUS PARTIES UNITED
WITH PAY TO PUSH THE AMENDMENT. THE STORY WILL PROBABLY
BE DIFFERENT IN COMMITTEE. WITH WEAK SUPPORT FROM THE
COALITION, THE BILL IS EXPECTED TO LANGUSH THERE -- TO
THE RELIEF OF MOST ISRAELIS. NO ONE RELISHES A
CONFRONTATION WITH A VITAL SEGMENT OF AMERICAN JEWRY AND
EXCEPT FOR A FEW ULTRA-ORTHODOX, ISRAELIS FEEL THIS IS NO
TIME TO REKINDLE PASSIONS OVER AN ISSUE THAT IS AS EXPLO-
SIVE AS THE STATUS OF RELIGIOUS ORTHODOXY IN THIS SOCIETY.
LEWIS

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01 jan 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: DEBATES, JEWS, CENTRAL LEGISLATURE
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 03 aug 1978
Decaption Date: 01 jan 1960
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 20 Mar 2014
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1978TELAV09931
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: N/A
Errors: N/A
Expiration:
Film Number: D780319-0022
Format: TEL
From: TEL AVIV
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1978/newtext/t197808100/aaaadgdh.tel
Line Count: 116
Litigation Code IDs:
Litigation Codes:
Litigation History:
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Message ID: c1c18457-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Office: ACTION NEA
Original Classification: LIMITED OFFICIAL USE
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 3
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: LIMITED OFFICIAL USE
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: n/a
Retention: 0
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 05 may 2005
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review Media Identifier:
Review Release Date: N/A
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
SAS ID: 1541666
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: ISSUE OF "WHO IS A JEW" RAISED IN KNESSET
TAGS: PINT, PGOV, IS
To: STATE
Type: TE
vdkgvwkey: odbc://SAS/SAS.dbo.SAS_Docs/c1c18457-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Review Markings:
Sheryl P. Walter
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
20 Mar 2014
Markings: Sheryl P. Walter Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 20 Mar 2014